

# Bernards Basketball Players Honor Sister By Creating Special Needs Basketball Clinic



Ask Nate Schmerler who is the most inspirational person in his life, and the Bernards High School basketball player won't hesitate to answer. It's his sister, Ally.

"Every single day it's something new," he said. "She's my older sister, so I already looked up to her. Just hanging out with her means a lot to me and makes me happy."

Nate, 17, just concluded his junior year at the Somerset County school. Ally, his 19-year old sister, is autistic.

From the time he was small, Nate has always had a special bond with Ally.

When he was in sixth grade, his school was visited by Eric LeGrand, the Rutgers football player who was paralyzed as a result of an on-field injury. In connection with that visit, the school held an essay contest about overcoming challenges, and winners got to personally meet Eric. The first line of Nate's essay said "My life has been pretty easy, but I live with someone whose life isn't." He proceeded to write about his sister, and how she inspired him and gave him perspective. To no surprise, Nate was one of those selected to meet Eric.

"I used to call him the 'Ally Whisperer'" said their mom, Kate Smith. "Even as a little kid, he could always get her to calm down. They have a very cute connection."

Since Nate is so in tune with Ally's wants and needs, there is something which has bothered him for quite awhile. As part of a basketball-loving family, there were always chances for he and his younger sister, 15-year old Kendall, to play organized ball. But for Ally, no opportunities existed other than the hoop in the driveway.



"My sister has autism, and seeing her growing up, she was always involved with basketball but could never play," he said.

From that, the idea for Ally Oops was born. Nate, along with Kendall and a number of their respective Bernards boys and girls basketball teammates, have created a weekly basketball clinic for special needs kids that's taking place throughout the summer at the Seney Drive Court in Bernardsville.

Nate wasn't quite sure what to expect prior to the first session of Ally Oops, but the big smiles on the faces of the kids and their parents when it was over made it very clear that they had created a winner.

"This means a lot for me," he said. "I'm doing this for her, so that she and kids like her can have an opportunity. I was in contact with the rec department already, since I had worked as a camp counselor for them and knew everyone who runs it. So I sent an email to them and proposed the idea, and they got back to me the next day and said 'Let's do it.'"

To promote the clinic, word was sent out to the nearby towns of Basking Ridge and Mendham, through social media and things like Facebook groups catered to special needs families.

The best part is that clinic is free, and that all of the athletes are donating their time, for the simple reason that they know and like Ally, and that doing something nice for kids like her is a cool thing to do.

"I'm very close with Nate's family and Ally and I see her often," said Bernards basketball player Marc Nakashian, who is also a rising senior. "I'm glad when I get to see her, because she's always smiling and very happy. My mom is a special education teacher, so I have that link where I've always wanted to help out with kids, especially ones who struggle more than others. I feel like everyone should be able to have some outlet, and providing it for them is just a good opportunity."

It's also the reason why Kendall and her teammates have gotten aboard.

"This is really important for me," Kendall said. "It's close to my heart, and it's a good thing for the community. I like to see people of all abilities grow and develop, and it's great that we can do it in a sport like basketball. My sister has always been so kind and caring, and a good role model. She's always on the sidelines supporting us and cheering for us. It's motivating to see her there on the sideline and cheering. Everyone likes Ally."

"Nate and Kendall started playing when they were young," their mom said. "I coached our town's girls travel team when Kendall was in middle school. Ally



loved basketball, too, and would come to all of the team's practices. She was our manager, but there weren't any programs, camps or clinics for special needs kids in town, so she never got to play, other than HORSE in our driveway."

It's why speaking strictly as a mom, she's glad something like Ally Oops can exist for kids like her own daughter.

"Ally Oops is about much more than basketball; it's about community. Just like anyone else, kids with special needs want to belong and feel included in their community. Programs like Ally Oops ensure that they are," she said. "The best part is that it's kids teaching other kids. Campers may not come away from this clinic with Steph Curry's jump shot, but they'll walk away with new friends in town. As a parent, that's what I consider the real value of this."

She's also proud of the initiative that her own kids have taken to organize the clinic in honor of their sister while supporting other special needs children in the community.



“I could not be more proud of these kids. Nate and Kendall have been asked to accommodate their sister’s needs their entire lives. They’ve had no choice in that,” she said. “So the fact that they CHOSE to create this program—in Ally’s honor and for kids like her—speaks volumes about their character.”

“I love being her brother,” Nate said. “And this has been so much fun to put together. The kids have had fun, and we’ve had fun, too.”

And that’s what’s most meaningful to the most important person in the entire story - Ally herself.

“It makes me feel happy,” she said. “Nate loves me. He’s a good brother.”

